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Vermont delegation calls for more wilderness

By Candace Page

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Vermont's congressional delegation Thursday proposed creation of a 12,437-acre wilderness area on the high ridges of the Green Mountains southeast of Middlebury.

Their proposal for the Joseph Battell Wilderness is part of a larger bill they introduced: the Vermont Wilderness Act of 2006. It would designate 48,161 additional acres of wilderness in the Green Mountain National Forest.

After long, divisive public debate, the U.S. Forest Service recently recommended a smaller amount of permanent wilderness, 27,473 acres, in its new plan to manage the sprawling forest.

Mechanized travel and commercial logging are not allowed in wilderness areas, where nature is left to take its course and only quiet recreation is permitted.

The three men -- Sens. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., and Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt. -- acknowledged that their proposal would make some Vermonters unhappy.

"Many Vermonters disagree with the need for any wilderness designations, much less additional lands to be set aside at this time," Jeffords said. "I understand their concerns, but I also recognize the intent of the Wilderness Act of 1964, and I believe deeply in the benefits of managing some areas so that the forces of nature hold sway."

The measure faces an uncertain fate in a Republican-controlled Congress generally unfriendly to setting aside federal land as wilderness.

Norm Arseneault is one Vermonter opposed to the delegation's bill. He is a professional forester and chairman of the selectboard in Granville, on the eastern slope of the mountains. The Breadloaf Wilderness already occupies a quarter of the town's land, he said, and the bill would designate another 4,000 acres.

"The Forest Service found no social need for more wilderness, no economic need, no biodiversity need and no research need," he said. "So, of course, they recommended another 27,000 acres and now the delegation has made it worse."

Wilderness advocates had been particularly disappointed that the Forest Service did not recommend permanent protection for about 12,000 acres in the Romance Mountain-Monastery Mountain area in Goshen and Hancock.

If the congressional proposal becomes law, the area would become permanent wilderness, named for Joseph Battell, a wealthy merchant who left thousands of acres to the public in the early 1900s, asking that it be left wild and unlogged. Romance Mountain was part of that bequest.

The bill "is absolutely the right thing to do," said Jim Northup of Richmond, executive director of Forest Watch and a longtime wilderness advocate. "Lasting protection of those rugged mountains would fulfill Battell's last wishes and would provide a fitting final chapter to his wildlands legacy."

Practically speaking, hikers and other users would not see much difference in Romance Mountain if the bill passes. The Forest Service already has said it will manage much of the area as "remote backcountry," where motor vehicles would not be allowed.

"The difference is, this bill would give permanent protection," said Leanne Klyza Link of Hinesburg, eastern forest senior associate at the Wilderness Society.

Northup also praised a proposal to designate most of the town of Glastenbury in southern Vermont as protected wilderness, although he said the measure does not go far enough. The congressional proposal adds 5,000 acres to the Forest Service's recommendation to protect more than 20,000 acres there.

"The 100-square-mile Glastenbury Mountain-Lye Brook wilderness complex is the biggest, best opportunity we have for restoring wilderness conditions in Vermont," he said. "It is one of the few places in Vermont that appears big and wild when viewed from outer space and deserves stronger, more far-reaching protections than are proposed in the bill."

Preserving the wild Here's a look at proposals contained in the Vermont Wilderness Act of 2006, in acres:

Size of Green Mountain National Forest: 400,000

Already designated wilderness: 59,000

Additions proposed by U.S. Forest Service: 27,473

Additions proposed by congressional delegation: 48,161

Joseph Battell Wilderness, Hancock, Goshen, Rochester: 12,437

Glastenbury Mountain, Glastenbury: 28,491

Breadloaf Wilderness expansion, Ripton: 4,223

Peru Peak expansion, Mount Tabor: 797

Lye Brook expansion, Winhall, Stratton: 2,171 acres

Big Branch expansion, Mount Tabor, 42